

Olympic Gymnast

“You’re going to need a bilateral bovine bone transplant.” I looked up at the man speaking, his worn down face lacked empathy. My face scrunched into an awkward smile as I decided whether this was an appropriate time to laugh or cry. Cow bones in my feet-- that was one of the more ridiculous things I heard in my life. I looked up again at the wrinkled old man before me and found that his grim, cold face answered my question. His lanky arms rested folded against his chest while he became increasingly irritated as tears welled up in my eyes and cascaded down my face. “You have to have the surgery and that means you will never be active again and you will have early onset arthritis,” the white-haired dream killer added. I could feel my body temperature rapidly rising as sheer panic overcame all other emotions. This was way too much information for my ten-year-old brain to comprehend. I rapidly shifted my weepy eyes around the hospital room at the barren white walls and industrial like chairs and tiling. This was a children’s hospital where children came to find out their fate, the least they could do is paint the desolate walls or adorn the place in some way. My terror-stricken blue eyes met the serious look on my mom’s face and I knew that my life was about to change. I took my index fingers and pushed them as far back into my ears as they would go hoping if I couldn’t hear what the doctors had to say, the havoc they were about to wreak on my life would evaporate.

My dad always told me that some day I was going to be an Olympic gymnast. I fit the characteristics of one; I was small for my age. I was still under four feet and barely sixty pounds. I was strong. I used to brag about how I could lift up my older brother who weighed eighty

pounds. I was flexible. I prided myself on how I could put both legs behind my head. I was tough. I could fall ten feet off the high beam and get right back up and do it again. I spent every free minute training because I didn't want to be good, I wanted to be great. I trained each day until I couldn't walk anymore, but the pain didn't bother me, because I was going to be an Olympic gymnast. The endless muscle aches I could deal with, but my malady quickly progressed into limited mobility. I'd lose my balance on a simple beam dismount, or I'd land a back handspring only to fall over. I failed to realize the irreversible damage I was doing to my body and instead thought that I had just lost my touch, so I trained harder and harder.

I practiced until I physically couldn't anymore. I sat with my legs crossed on the raggedy, blue carpet of Red Cedar Gymnastics. I could smell the sweat that was so deeply absorbed in carpeting that my nose stung from the saltiness. I glanced down at my feet and they were beet red and swollen, which was not out of the ordinary after a grueling practice. But this time, there was something different; something was sticking out on the sides of my feet. They looked misshapen. I pulled myself up off the ground with the little energy I had left and hobbled over to the office to call my mom. That's how I found myself crying as the skinny, white-haired doctor stood before me and ripped my bright future right out of my hands. I was terrified, no I was petrified. I was only ten-years-old. Before me, stood an unfamiliar, unkind face explaining that I needed surgery, but he didn't know what was wrong with me.

"What we are going to do is called a calcaneal osteotomy," the seasoned physician said. His words sounded like another language to me, but for some reason I felt the hair raising on the back of my neck as fear filled my body.

“But why? What is wrong with me that I need that?” I questioned. I could see him shifting back and forth on his four-wheeled leather stool.

“I’m not exactly sure what caused your condition, or even what it can really be named, but somehow your feet and the tendons in your legs have become mangled and need to be fixed. It doesn’t need to be a bovine transplant, it can be from a cadaver,” he calmly stated. The word cadaver rang in my head between my ears. My eyes widened and I took a deep breath.

“Bones from a dead person, you’ve got to be kidding me.” He shook his head and with that I knew I had the biggest decision of my life to make. I was scared, but I was smart. I knew without surgery, I was going to spend the rest of my life in an exorbitant amount of pain with constrained mobility.

When I woke up from my first surgery I was more terror-stricken than I had been when I initially found out I needed surgery. I could see. I saw the tattered, off white walls in my part of the recovery room that was sectioned off by dingy light blue curtains. I could hear. I heard the nurse tell an intern to go get my parents because I had woken up. I could smell. My nose cringed as it met that hospital smell of chemicals and blood. I could cry. I cried because I was frightened. I couldn’t move my legs. I felt paralyzed and trapped in my own body. The more I tried to move the more tired and frustrated I grew. So I did the only thing a ten year old knows how to do when they are in a state of panic. I began screaming. Not the kind of screaming which signifies a scraped knee or bruised forehead; the kind of blood curdling scream that I imagine I would use if

someone sawed off my legs. It seemed appropriate as I couldn't feel my legs, so they might as well have been chopped off at the hips.

Hours later, the epidural wore off and I could feel my legs again. The doctors came in and explained in great detail all the things that I now could not do. "You can't stand up, so don't try to. You can't walk, so don't try to. You can't move your legs inside the casts, so don't try to." The list seemed to drag on and on, but I was used to this sort of thing by now. It seemed my life had turned into an endless stream of things that I couldn't or shouldn't do. I agreed not to do any of the tasks on his list not because I thought I couldn't, but because I was ten-years-old and I desperately wanted him to stop talking.

My first day back at school proved to be disastrous. I eagerly wheeled up to the big, blue doors of Kinawa Middle School only to realize that I couldn't manage to get close enough to the door in my wheelchair to reach the door handles. I waited and waited until someone finally came to help me. I took a deep breath, because this was only a minor setback, and I knew the rest of the day was going to be great. I beelined straight for the library because that's where my friends and I convened before school to confer about the latest gossip. When I approached the deteriorating doorframe my wheelchair came to a sudden halt. There was a bump over the doorway that had to be passed over in order to enter the library. I backed up and tried again with no such luck. Feeling discouraged, I turned around and made my way to my first class. Not even ten minutes into English, I dropped my pencil and couldn't find a way to pick it up. The day went on a downward spiral of unfortunate events from there. I dropped my lunch tray, got stuck in the bathroom and worst of all rolled down some steps and ejected myself from my wheelchair.

As if this day hadn't already been tragic enough I now found myself lying on the squalid floor of my dilapidated middle school.

My face was pressed so firmly against the ground that I could see each individual stone of the faux granite floor. My body ached and a sharp pain shot through my left leg. I tilted my neck and looked around, but there was nobody in sight. I grabbed my cell phone out of the pocket of my sweatpants and began calling my mom. Before the phone even had a chance to start ringing I quickly slammed it shut. I didn't want help and I certainly didn't need help, because for once, I wanted to be able to fix myself. I rolled onto my back and then tried to sit up, but each time I went crashing back down. I was afraid of failure and I just couldn't bring myself to admit I needed help. I grabbed onto the wall and desperately tried to make my way back into my chair but I had no success. Every muscle in my body ached with defeat. I pulled my phone out once again, but before I could even press the worn down buttons of my LG Chocolate, a teacher walked by and found me in distress. She cautiously helped me back into my chair and escorted me to the office where she insisted I needed my mom to come pick me up. As I waited in the office for my mom, I fidgeted in my chair as my face turned increasingly red. I felt humiliated. I'm the girl who can't even take herself to the bathroom. "You will never be active again." Those words stuck in my brain like a leech as I sat once again in the lifeless waiting room of the hospital.

"You need to stop trying to push your limits. You are too weak to push yourself around and try to get in and out of your wheelchair by yourself," the apathetic doctor said with a stoic face. My lips quivered and my eyes began to well up. I bit down on my tongue to avoid letting

out the wails that were soon to come. “Maybe you should do school from home for now, you’re not ready for this,” he added.

“I just want to go back to gymnastics,” I cried. The thought of my feet hitting the soft, springy vault and catapulting my flexible body into the air again was the only thing that kept me going. I pictured myself doing the final round off back handspring to end my perfected floor routine, and I was able to breathe once again.

“I’m just not sure you’ll ever be able to exercise again, and you’re never really going to be a walker. You’re lucky that you can even take a few steps.” That combination of simple words knocked the wind out of me. I felt my throat closing in on me and my heart pumping so rapidly, I thought it might explode out of my chest. I turned around and made the most dramatic exit that a person in a wheelchair possibly could. I reached and slammed the door shut as hard as my frail arms could and took off down the hallway. I heard my parents chasing after me yelling my name, but I tuned them out. They caught up with me because I couldn’t turn the wheels on my useless wheelchair as fast as my parents could run.

“You can’t just run every time you hear something you don’t like,” my mom scolded.

“You need to listen to what the doctors are saying, they know what they’re doing,” my dad added. I sat there silently and dismissed my parents’ remarks. My parents wanted to support me, they really did, but they didn’t know any better. They were lawyers, they wouldn’t want a doctor to tell them how to do their jobs, and they certainly weren’t going to try to tell the doctor how to do his job. When we got home, I found a way to get out of my wheelchair and sit myself in my desk chair. I used my desk to methodically push myself into a standing position. Before I even had a second to rejoice that I was on my feet, I lost my balance and took a tumble straight

into my rough, jagged carpeting. I tried again and again until every last ounce of strength in my body was gone. I looked up into my make up smudged mirror at myself as I sat on the beige carpet. I stared at my overworked body and into my tired eyes. My body seemed to be giving up on me, but my brain still had a fight left in it. My scrawny, brittle arms reached up to my desk one final time, and I yanked my feeble body up one last time. I took a deep breath and stared down at my feet. I watched as my left foot made its way in front of my right and then the right in front of the left. I couldn't believe that I was actually walking. I felt like I had just won the Olympics. Soon enough, I came crashing to the ground once again, but this time I did not feel defeated.

Two months later, I found myself back in the surgical wing of Mott Children's Hospital where the doctors were going to meet with me to assess my progress. While I eagerly waited to be called back to the clinic my eyes wandered around the waiting room. Something looked different on this day. There was this feeling of hope that led me to notice things that I hadn't before. The vibrant, plastic tables were lined with every type of coloring book imaginable. I picked up a Disney princess one and looked at the high heels that the princesses wore and thought about how one day I would be able to wear those. I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach that this time the doctor was going to say that I was fixed and that I could continue pursuing my dream to be an Olympic gymnast. My eyes lit up when the doctor complimented my progress and noted that I was actually able to walk down the hallway without holding on to

the walls or falling over. My ears were practically jumping off the sides of my head as I listened and listened waiting for him to say I could go back to sports.

“Although your progress is quite impressive for such an extensive surgery, I’m afraid this might be as good as you are ever going to get. You should be grateful that you can walk so well, because I wasn’t sure you were ever going to be able to do that again. Be thankful for that instead of being upset about the fact that you won’t be able to participate in sports anymore.” My enraged eyes met those of the doctor who seemed to have few other words in his vocabulary than can’t. He grabbed the tissue box in his hand and extended his arm towards me because he was expecting me to cry again, but I didn’t. I hopped off the hospital table and headed for the door. I turned the shiny metal door handle and walked out. Two steps down the hallway I turned around because I had forgotten that I had two words left to say to him.

“Watch me.” With that, I briskly walked out of the room, intently concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. I looked at the colorful red and blue carpet and the spirited paintings that lined the hall, and that’s when I knew that for these past few years I wasn’t living my life how I wanted to. At eleven-years-old, I decided I didn’t need that kind of negativity in my life. I traveled around the country to see doctors; all the way from Seattle to Detroit. I’ve been examined by nearly a hundred doctors and each one was left dumbfounded by how I could walk with such destroyed legs. Every physical therapist in the state knows my name and most orthopedic doctors probably do too. I’ve had them tell me that it’s not possible for someone like me to be walking. I’ve been called a medical mystery. I’ve been told to stop all physical activity because my legs are bound to crumple underneath me any second. I’ve been told that even walking is damaging to my body. But each time I meet someone who wants to tell me I can’t

walk, I run in the opposite direction. They told me I would never be someone who was a walker and they were right. I'm not a walker, I'm a runner.